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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal presence refers to the cues individuals use to form impressions of one another and form/maintain relationships. The physical cues used to convey interpersonal presence in face-to-face learning environments are absent in text-based computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) courses. Learners' perceptions of interpersonal presence in CMC courses were examined in a study during which eight graduate students completed an online questionnaire about their impressions of interpersonal presence in CMC courses. Participants' notions of what constitutes interpersonal presence in CMC courses broke down into personal style (how people "come across" as a person) and collegial style (how people "come across" in terms of being a fellow student). Participants identified the following methods of conveying interpersonal presence in CMC courses: personal identifiers, socializing efforts, and communication style. According to the participants, two types of interwoven relationships develop in CMC courses. They are social (based on mutual personal interests) and collegial (based on mutual academic interests and purpose). Some participants valued social relationships more highly than others did; however, all participants valued collegial relationships quite highly. Group tasks, group size, and the course instructor also influenced development of collegial relationships. It was concluded that online courses must contain opportunities for conveyance of social and collegial cues. (Contains 13 references.) (MN)

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INTERPERSONAL PRESENCE IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED CONFERENCING COURSES

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Introduction

Interpersonal presence may be thought of as the cues we use to form impressions of one another (e.g., personality, attitudes, likes/dislikes, etc), and by which relationships of varying depth, duration and purpose are. In face-to-face (F2F) learning environments interpersonal presence is conveyed to a large extent by physical cues, both verbal (e.g., tone, nuance, etc) and non-verbal (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, body language). In text-based, computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) courses, however, these physical cues are absent. In light of this many consider online learning to be a poor substitute for classroom based learning. Others believe, however, that online learning provides the opportunity for equally satisfying, albeit different, ways of relating. This presentation will explore the findings of a recent study by this author that investigated learners' perceptions of interpersonal presence in (CMC) courses.

Interpersonal Presence Study

Eight graduate students completed an online questionnaire about their impressions of interpersonal presence in CMC courses. All of the participants were female and had completed a minimum of two graduate level CMC courses with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Toronto, Canada) using Web Knowledge Forum, an asynchronous threaded discussion forum. Clarification and further elaboration of responses were obtained via e-mail as required.

Participants' notions of **what** constitutes interpersonal presence in CMC courses broke down into two broad categories:

- **Personal Style** - this refers to the way in which people "come across" or their "presence" as a person (e.g., sarcastic, witty, poetic, supportive of others, matter of fact, sarcastic, conciliatory, etc.)
- **Collegial Style** - this refers how people "come across" or their "presence" in terms of being a fellow student (e.g., how well the person works in groups, how often and how well they contribute, how open they are to others' ideas, their writing style, etc).

In terms of **how** interpersonal presence is conveyed, participants identified three general methods:

- **Personal Identifiers**
  - Biographical information
  - Posting of pictures
  - Links to personal web sites

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- **Socializing Efforts**
  - Use of e-mail "outside of class" for personal conversations
  - Sharing of personal information/ experiences
  - Supportiveness, helpfulness, openness, friendliness, etc., between one another
- **Communication style**
  - expressions of emotion (e.g., emoticons, jokes, etc)
  - tone of writing (e.g., sarcastic, conciliatory, apologetic, etc),
  - style of writing (formal/informal, clarity, ability to articulate, organization, etc)
  - quality and quantity of participation (e.g., how often peers contribute, when they contribute, how "in tune" they are with the discussions, etc)

Relational Aspects of Interpersonal Presence

According to participants, two types of interwoven relationships develop in CMC courses:

- **Social** - based on mutual personal interests such as family, recreation, etc.
- **Collegial** - based on mutual academic interests and purpose.

The value of **social relationships** was more important to some than to others. Most participants said they found social relationships to be somewhat lacking in **depth** in comparison to F2F, and primarily because of the lack of physical presence. This was considered a negative aspect of CMC courses. That said, however, with regard to **duration and purpose**, most of the participants said that they don't keep up with social relationships after a course ends either in F2F or CMC. It appears that once the catalyst for interacting is no longer there (i.e., the course and a shared purpose), the impetus for carrying on a social relationship seems to die.

The value of **collegial relationships,** however, was quite high for all of the participants and *very* important to their learning, both in terms of satisfaction and outcomes. In addition to interpersonal presence, three other factors appear to encourage or diminish the development of collegial relationships:

- **Group Tasks** - Almost all of the participants made reference to the importance of group work in getting to know their colleagues better. At the same time, most also said that group projects were much harder to accomplish in CMC than F2F due to the lack of physical presence.
- **Group Size** - The respondents were unanimous that too large a group inhibits the ability to form relationships. For most, difficulties tend to be experienced in CMC courses larger than fifteen students.

- **Course Instructor** - The majority of participants suggested that the instructor can help/hinder the process of forming interpersonal relationships (e.g., setting a tone that invites openness, risk-taking, and social interaction).

Discussion

This study was limited and as such, caution is recommended regarding any generalization of the data. For example, these results do not address many other factors such as gender differences, software, different types of learners, and so on. Future research will need to investigate whether or not these preliminary findings hold true in other contexts.

The study does suggest that interpersonal presence is conveyed in CMC courses, although in the judgement of participants in a somewhat diminished fashion compared to F2F courses. However, this is balanced by the convenience of online learning (i.e., "anywhere, anytime learning"). The importance of interpersonal presence lies mainly in the development of short duration, purposeful learner-learner (collegial) relationships versus ongoing personal/social relationships. Although social and collegial styles are interwoven into and important to conveying interpersonal presence, it is the latter that seems of greatest value to forging the type of relationship learners benefit most from in CMC courses.

Conclusion

The ever-increasing popularity of online learning can be attributed to a variety of factors, but in particular to the increased freedom from time and place that it affords learners. Collegial relationships are important to learning outcomes and satisfaction in CMC courses, thus course facilitators need to build into their courses the opportunity for the conveyance of "social" and "collegial" cues. Future research should focus on factors that will enhance both collegial and social relationships in CMC courses such as group size, the inclusion of F2F elements such as desktop video-conferencing/computer whiteboards to make group work easier to accomplish, and so on.

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